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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 CAIRO 000144

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SUBJECT: MUSLIM BROTHERHOOD ANNOUNCES INTENT TO FORM
POLITICAL PARTY; ARRESTS CONTINUE

REF: A. CAIRO 47

1B. 06 CAIRO 7251

1C. CAIRO 15

Classified By: DCM Stuart Jones, for reasons 1.5 (b) and (d).

11. (C) Summary: Muslim Brotherhood (MB) leaders have publicly announced the organization's intent to form a political party within "a few weeks," an unprecedented step for the 79-year old organization. The new party would reportedly be "a civil party with an Islamic reference," and will not submit a license application to the Political Parties Committee (as required by Egyptian law) as the MB deems the ruling-party dominated committee "unconstitutional." Party formation may provide the mechanism for the MB to counter long-standing criticism that there is no official platform that clarifies the group's policy views. At a time when Hosni Mubarak is trying to showcase new constitutional reforms, and rhetorically beating the drum of increased political party diversity, the MB appears to be calling the government's bluff. The formation of a political party, which the government will undoubtedly work to block, is likely in no small part a political maneuver designed to embarrass the regime, and demonstrate the emptiness of its reformist rhetoric. Talk of political party formation comes against the backdrop of continuing arrests of MB members, with six more businessmen detained on January 15 on charges of financing MB activities, and another three on January 17. End summary.

NEW TERRAIN FOR THE MB: POLITICAL PARTY FORMATION

12. (SBU) In a series of recent statements by senior leadership figures, the MB announced its intent to form a political party, an unprecedented step for the organization. In a January 13 statement to the independent daily Al Misry Al Yom, Supreme Guide Mohamed Mehdi Akef asserted that the MB's political bureau and legal committee are currently preparing the proposed party's draft platform, which should be finished "in a few weeks." Deputy Supreme Guide Mohamed Habib, in January 14 comments to the press, claimed that "the MB is in the final stages of forming a political party." MB sources quoted in the Egyptian press in recent days have reportedly stated that the new party would be "conservative," a "civil party with an Islamic reference," and that "it will call for spreading values and ethics inside Egyptian society." MB sources have also been cited as stating that the new party will "include figures of conservative ideology from all trends, and will not be limited to the MB only," and that Egyptian Copts will be able to join the party, "as it will not be established on a religious or ethnic basis." Habib noted to the press that through the new party, "we are

going to issue a political program reflecting our vision of how to solve the daily problems faced by Egyptian citizens, be they social, cultural, economic, or health-related ... as well as our views on domestic, regional, and international policies."

¶3. (SBU) Senior officials within the MB, including Guidance Council members Mohamed Mursi and Abdel Moneim Aboul Fotouh, have been quoted in the press as stating that the new party will not submit an application to the Political Parties Committee (PPC), a body the MB deems "unconstitutional." (Note: Approval by the PPC is a necessary step under Egyptian law for parties to be licensed, and thus participate in elections and other political activities. End note.) Aboul Fotouh has called for renaming the law regulating the formation of political parties the "anti-party law" as it is so "restrictive." He also criticized the PPC's "domination" by the ruling National Democratic Party (NDP), in order to "subjugate all opposition." He noted that the MB "will simply inform the committee of our party's establishment, thereby circumventing the legal procedures." Mursi told journalists that the MB will "bypass" the "government-controlled and unconstitutional PPC," noting that an Egyptian court "only a few days ago rejected establishing twelve new political parties, although some of them have been politically active for years, and even have members in Parliament!" (ref A).

¶4. (SBU) The MB's surprising announcement came on the heels of a January 7 interview of Safwat El Sherif (NDP Secretary General, speaker of the Shoura Council, and head of the Political Parties Committee) on a TV show on the Dream Two satellite channel, in which he stated that, "If the necessary conditions, stipulated by law and the Constitution, are met, there will be no problem (with the MB forming a political

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party) ... If the group (the MB) is turned into a political party, in compliance with the law, the problem will be solved ... I am the NDP Secretary General, and I am telling you that the political parties are invited to increase their activity and no one will obstruct them." (Note: No formal moves by either the Political Parties Committee or the NDP back-up Sherif's statements. End Note). Interestingly, while vigorously critical of many of President Hosni Mubarak's proposed changes to Egypt's constitution (ref B), the MB has been publicly supportive of a planned amendment of Article 5, to formalize in the constitution the current de facto ban on political parties based on "religion, race, and lineage." Additionally, Hussein Mohamed Ibrahim (vice-chairman of the MB's parliamentary bloc) submitted a draft law to Parliament on January 8 that would ban forming parties "who discriminate in their membership according to religious or sectarian bases" and "aim at establishing militias." The draft law (which has minimal chance of either being seriously debated or passed by Parliament, due to the NDP's commanding legislative majority) would also abolish the Political Parties Committee, requiring only notification of the Interior Ministry upon establishment of a new party.

ARRESTS AND RHETORIC CONTINUE TO ESCALATE

¶5. (SBU) Talk of political party formation comes against the backdrop of continuing arrests of MB figures, with six more businessmen detained on January 15 on charges of financing MB activities, and another three on January 17. Among the recent arrestees are MB Guidance Council member Mohamed Ali Beshr and Abdel Rahman Seoudi (owner of the popular Cairo supermarket chain, "Seoudi Market"). The proportion of businessmen among recent arrestees is an indication of the GOE's continued targeting of the MB's financial infrastructure (an effort which began in late December, as reported ref C). The government daily Al Ahram reported on January 14 that the MB has "lost" approximately 500 million

LE (approximately \$87 million) since the latest round of arrests began.

16. (SBU) The government's anti-MB rhetoric has also been escalating in recent days, spearheaded by President Mubarak, who warned in a recent much-publicized interview that, "The banned Brotherhood group is a danger to Egypt's security because it adopts a religious approach. If we assume that this trend increases, there will be a repetition in Egypt of other experiments that are not far from us - regimes that represent political Islam which are facing isolation along with their people. Many people will take their money and flee from the country. Investments will come to a halt and unemployment will spiral. Actually, Egypt would be completely isolated from the world." In response, MB Deputy Supreme Guide Habib told journalists, "Two million Egyptians voted for the MB's representatives in the last legislative elections ... all these people cannot be a threat to Egypt's security." The MB also released a lengthy official statement responding to Mubarak, which included comments such as, "As for what causes investors to flee the country, it is despotism, corruption, and the Emergency Law, under which tens of thousands were arrested without investigation, accusation, or trial it is the masses of central security forces which imply to an outsider that the country is in a state of war ... it is the continuous attack on human rights, and dignity, and confiscation of his freedom, and lack of respect for judicial rulings, and the prevalent corruption in all sectors of the state"

17. (C) Various contacts (among them opposition parliamentarians and analysts at the Al Ahram Center) have observed recently that actions by both the MB and the government represent a "serious escalation" of the tensions that normally characterize their delicate and calculated relationship. One parliamentarian mused that the GOE is in a "state of panic" about the MB, noting that there is "no coherence to the government's action" and no long-term strategy for how to integrate the MB into the political system. "Until we do so," he added, "Egypt must see-saw its way through the inherent instability created by this unhealthy dynamic that overshadows all political life here."

COMMENT

18. (C) The MB's stated intention to form a political party may demonstrate an evolution within the organization. MB "moderates" such as Aboul Fotouh and Essam El Erian, who have

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reportedly long been advocating for the formation of a political party, appear to have triumphed (for the moment) over their more conservative counterparts who allegedly prefer the MB's status quo as a banned but tolerated organization, and a focus on the group's Da'wa (proselytizing and charity) activities. Party formation may provide the mechanism for the MB to counter long-standing criticism that there is no official platform that clarifies the group's policy views; if the planned party charter lives up the MB's hype, it will clearly delineate policy positions on a variety of domestic and international issues. The MB's apparent plan to form a political party ex machina mirrors the group's recent tactics in other fora - student and labor union elections - where the MB formed parallel extra-legal institutions in which they could operate, when prevented from competing within government-sanctioned lines. Overall, at a time when Mubarak is trying to showcase new constitutional reforms, and rhetorically beating the drum of increased political party diversity, the MB appears to be calling the government's bluff. The formation of a political party, which the government will undoubtedly work to block, is likely in no small part a maneuver designed to embarrass the regime, and demonstrate the emptiness of its reformist rhetoric.

